



Pearson most likely to succeed

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With help from activist Noel Pearson, Aboriginal communities in north Queensland are taking steps towards fighting the scourge of alcohol abuse, reports national affairs editor Mike Steketee

“POLITICALLY, the two people we are closest to are Abbott and Latham,” says Noel Pearson. The Aboriginal leader from Cape York has always had an ability to transcend conventional politics, combining his campaign for genuine land rights in the wake of the Mabo decision with his scarring analysis of the effect of passive welfare on his people.

He has cast far and wide for solutions, including restricting access to alcohol and recruiting the help of the corporate sector and philanthropists for economic development and education. But delivering a unity ticket between Tony Abbott and Mark Latham is something else again.

There are no two people with a more combative relationship in politics. Abbott's assault last week on Latham's personal life, complete with references to the “abandoned first wife”, earned a rebuke from John Howard. Last year, during an Abbott speech in parliament about trade unions, Latham interjected: “You've had too many unions, Tony, you grub” -- a reference to Abbott fathering a child out of wedlock.

It says something about how politics can be played at different levels. What brought Abbott and Latham together was Pearson's courage in cutting through the layers of what was acceptable and possible in indigenous affairs and addressing the core problems of communities being destroyed by alcohol and violence. Pearson is intent on engaging both Government and Opposition in his plans for re-establishing fully functioning and economically independent indigenous communities.

Abbott in his previous job as employment minister was, as Pearson put it in an interview in Cairns this week, “very, very energetic”, making visits to individual communities in Cape York.

The locals still marvel at seeing him up a tree helping out in a business venture under which young Aborigines harvest oil and other products from the bush. Abbott took responsibility for co-ordinating

a so-called whole-of-government approach to finding solutions for chronic alcoholism, welfare dependency and violence in the Cape.

As for Latham, Pearson says: “He came here and we took him through an explanation of our analysis of substance abuse and he was the one guy in parliament making speeches, talking to people and endorsing what we were doing.”

That was then and this is now. Abbott has moved on to become Health Minister and, despite representations from Pearson, has lost his responsibility for Cape York. Howard visited in August, but there is scepticism about how much concrete assistance the Government will deliver.

Latham is undergoing a remake as Labor leader and it remains to be seen how much of his politics of third way pragmatism survives.

“Labor has to decide whether indigenous policy is the toilet cleaner on the Titanic in terms of politics,” says Pearson.

Both in the Cape and outside, there are doubts, not to mention outright hostility, to Pearson’s approach. Some typecast the man who grew close to Paul Keating during the native title debate as a right-winger who has sold out. But it is hard to ignore the brutal honesty in Pearson’s approach, distilled from his lawyer’s training in logic and his experience of living in Aboriginal communities.

Besides, he continues to campaign for land rights and expresses concern that progress has stalled. He is scathing about the High Court’s “abandonment of indigenous Australians” in its judgment last year in the Yorta Yorta case and is advocating an amendment to the act to reflect the original intent of the Mabo judgment and of parliament on granting native title. The Howard Government, which pared back indigenous rights to land, is highly unlikely to respond and Labor to date has been noncommittal.

Pearson sees native title as an integral part of his rights and responsibilities agenda, which also includes welfare reform, intolerance of substance abuse and preserving the environment.

“At a mundane level, land is the one resource we have,” he says. “That is my argument with the conservatives: if you want Aboriginal people to take responsibility, to be self-sufficient, the first point has got to be that you recognise their property rights. The cultural importance of land to the identity of Aboriginal people is also very important.”

But Pearson also acknowledges that giving people back their land has not been the key to their future that many hoped. He says communities that have never been dispossessed or had their land returned to them and who maintain their languages and culture often are not in very different situations to those who suffered dispossession and discrimination for 150 years or longer.

Pearson’s perspective springs from his background. His grandparents’ and parents’ generations lived in an era when discrimination and racism were rife, the state government stole Aborigines’ wages and there were few opportunities for education.

“My grandparents were torn away from their families and brought into the Lutheran mission,” he says. “They were two people whose lives were completely

shattered but they got married, had nine kids and rebuilt a family.

“My mum couldn’t read or write. My dad got a mission education and went to grade four. But they brought us up well. I was in a big family with seven kids. There was no violence, no drinking and they encouraged us to have a good education.

“Now I just see this paradox that functional family life has broken down, so it is so hard to take advantage of the opportunities that we now have. Most of the violence and murder and neglect and abuse of children is internally inflicted. That is what got me focusing on the fatal connection between [welfare] passivity and substance abuse.”

The connection, as Pearson sees it, is addiction. “It is true that people in traumatic situations are more at risk of trying addictive substances but the social environment becomes irrelevant after a while.” Addicts will seize any argument in their favour, including their right to drink.

“A lot of people on the Left consider welfare dependency is a problem,” he says. “But they may say we have to solve the land rights problem first. What use are land rights if socially we have fallen apart in the meantime?”

The Beattie Government responded to Pearson’s representations by legislating for alcohol management plans that each of the 16 communities on the Cape are required to implement. They are not prescriptive but typically restrict drinking to canteens and ban take-aways. Less drinking in homes has meant less violence in places such as Aurukun.

That is not to say the problem has been solved. One criticism is that it has merely moved the heavy drinking out of the communities. Pearson criticises the state Government for being gutless over limiting large volume sales from liquor outlets, arguing that they should be forbidden to people living in Aboriginal communities.

Three communities are conducting family income management trials, which encourage all members of a household with an income to deposit money in centrally administered accounts to meet future needs and to save for purchases such as refrigerators and washing machines. It also helps quarantine money from drinkers who expect relatives to pay for their grog.

Pearson wants to go further by borrowing an idea from Latham and setting up matching accounts, under which the Government would contribute as much, or more, as families who saved for a specific purpose, such as education.

The establishment, mainly by women, of community justice groups is reducing crime in some communities. Marilyn Wallace became involved in her town of Coen after she lost two sons to alcohol-induced suicide.

“Losing kids gave me the strength to help people in my community,” she says. Apart from going out with others to stop fights, she counsels people and helps mediate disputes. “We gain respect from them,” she says.

Indigenous Enterprise Partnerships, with a board of corporate, philanthropic and

Aboriginal leaders, offers specific skills and funding to indigenous communities. Last year, it supplied 180 people for periods of between a month and a year.

These included 70 from Westpac, of whom 50 worked directly in communities -- half advising on the family income management scheme and the remainder providing business advice and support. Five successful tourism businesses, among others, have been established.

Pearson is keeping his feet on the ground. ``This is still at the very early stages," he says. ``Lurking in the back of my mind all the time is the fear that there have been so many false dawns in indigenous affairs. I go through periods of pessimism but, on the whole, I have to say we are getting momentum in our wheels."